



Focus

Buying Water for Fish – Pilot Program

Program overview

The Washington State 1999 Legislature appropriated \$1 million to fund a pilot program for the purchase or lease of water rights. These acquisitions will help to preserve and enhance instream flows in fish critical basins – areas where there is not enough water for fish. Instream flows are scientifically-established surface water flows. The measurement is to ensure water is available today and in the future for people and fish.

The Department of Ecology (Ecology) will place purchased or leased water rights in the Trust Water Program to benefit instream flows, in accordance with Chapter 90.42 RCW.

This pilot program is limited to basins that 1) have current or proposed listing of salmon or steelhead under the Endangered Species Act and 2) include low water flows in streams and rivers as a limiting factor for salmon recovery.

Priorities

The Legislature directed Ecology to set priorities for funding using the following criteria:

- Greatest benefit for restoring and protecting fish.
- Benefits in addition to protecting fish critical streams and rivers; for example, habitat enhancement, conservation easement, flood protection.
- Additional funds from other sources.
- Broad level of support from interested parties.
- Lowest administrative cost.
- Lowest overall cost within the context of the local water resources market.

Program approach

The program is voluntary and focuses on the acquisition (purchase or lease) of valid water rights from willing sellers. Ecology is initially focusing on several basins in Water Resource Inventory Areas (WRIAs) that meet the above criteria – the Elwha-Dungeness (WRIA 18), the Methow (WRIA 48), the Yakima (WRIA 37, 38, 39), and the Walla Walla (WRIA 32).

If significant opportunities to buy water arise beyond the initial focus basins, Ecology will consider proposals from other basins that meet the criteria. Since there will not be enough funds to act on every proposal, Ecology will document these proposals to use as a list of acquisitions for when future funding becomes available.

Ecology is an equal opportunity employer.

Tracking progress

Ecology is tracking acquisitions in a database. The database will track the basin, river system, fish species affected, water right priority date, amount of water, river reach, and type/length of acquisition. Pilot program success measures include the following:

- Increased amount of water kept in a given stream for instream flows for fish and other aquatic uses.
- Length of protected stream reaches.
- Number of acquisitions that are in progress or completed.

Ecology will make a progress and recommendations report to the legislature by Dec. 1, 2000.

Coordinated process and outreach strategy

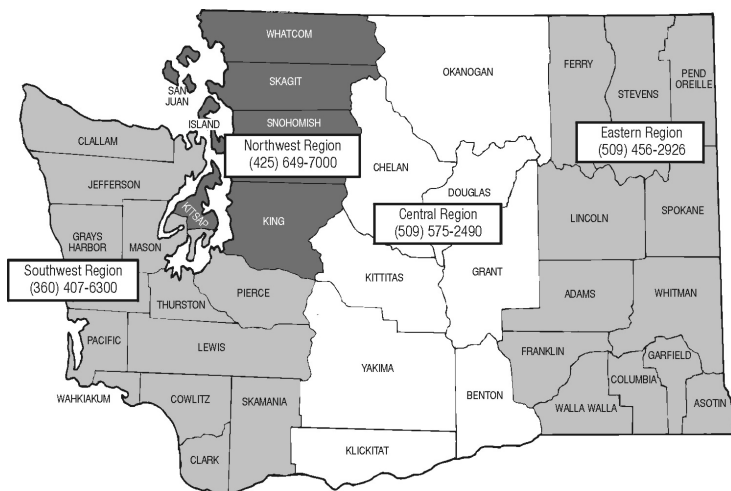
Ecology is working with watershed planning units in local communities to identify opportunities and to provide information about the pilot water-buying program. Ecology is also partnering with non-profit organizations that have experience in buying land or water for conservation to facilitate the acquisitions. Non-profit organizations are contacting property owners directly.

Ecology will use contracts and the water right change application process to convey purchased or leased water to instream flows. Ecology will verify that the amount of water offered is eligible to be put into trust. The change applications will be processed either by Ecology or by a local, county water conservancy board.

We hope this strategy will create support for future water markets and lead to identifying willing sellers. If potential purchases can't be financed between now and June 30, 2001, the end of the biennium, Ecology will have an inventory of possible sellers to expand the program in future years. Ecology will collect and share the water acquisition information with interested parties.

For more information

For more information contact Laura Lowe, Department of Ecology, P.O. Box 47600, Olympia, WA 98504-7600, (360) 407-7255, email [llowe461@ecy.wa.gov], or contact the regional office nearest you.



Additional information can be found on these websites:

Water Resources:

www.wa.gov/ecology/wr/wrhome

Watershed Planning:

www.wa.gov/ecology/watershed/

If you have special accommodation needs or require this document in an alternative format, please contact Christine Corrigan at (360) 407-6607 (voice) or (360) 407-6006 (TDD).